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Paintings by

Kandinsky

1866-1944

from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
New York

at the Tate Gallery, London. 15 January
until 16 February 1958

Arranged by The Arts Council of Great Britain

Foreword

It has been said by Picasso that there is no such thing as abstract art. Someone else has said with equal force that all art is abstract. Today abstract art is usually defined more precisely as non-objective or non-figurative art. In this sense it has existed for almost half a century and is now the deliberately chosen style of many serious and distinguished artists.

Abstract art emerged, like Cubism and nearly at the same time, as a logical evolutionary step. Almost simultaneously, and in a number of different places, creative artists started to work in the new style: Kandinsky in Munich, Mondrian and Delaunay in Paris, and Malevitch in Moscow. A water-colour of 1910 by Kandinsky was perhaps the first abstract painting and reflects his links with Fauvism, links which in the case of Mondrian and of Delaunay (currently being shown at the Arts Council Gallery) were with Cubism and Impressionism respectively. His whole subsequent development is well shown in this selection from the renowned collection of his work owned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

To the Trustees and the Director, Mr James Johnson Sweeney, the Arts Council offers its gratitude for sending again so soon another exhibition of twentieth-century painting, and to the Trustees and Director of the Tate Gallery for providing the space in which to show it.

Philip James

Introduction

Kandinsky's painting may be said to fall into two main divisions: the free expressionism which distinguished his work between the years 1909 and 1918; and the tight, more geometrical compositions of 1921 to 1935. Each is vastly different from the other; and both phases have had important influences on twentieth-century Western art. 'Have had' is perhaps the wrong tense; for today both aspects of Kandinsky's work are still exerting live influence on contemporary painting. His free handling of colour and line in the years just before World War I, which led the naturalistic expression of that day to linear and chromatic harmonies emancipated from the conventional representation of nature, may be seen today as the basis of contemporary gesture or action painting. The more geometrically disciplined expression of his post-revolution Russian years and of those years from 1922 to 1932 during which he was associated with the Bauhaus, first in Weimar and later in Dessau, which left its mark on so many of the young Central European artists of those years, became, during World War II and directly afterwards, the basis for an influential group of young Paris painters for a revolt against the domination of contemporary picture-making by the work of such leaders as Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and their admirers.

In Kandinsky's early work his Oriental patrimony is clearly evident: Slav folk art and the decorative interests we associate with the great years of the Imperial Russian Ballet. In

his post-Bauhaus years in Paris we see the persevering youth of his art in its hospitality to influences from his younger colleagues – notably that of Joan Miró for whose work he had a deep admiration. At the same time we recognize in this most mature phase of his work the fusion of these new strains with the discipline of his Bauhaus years and a distinct recall of Oriental notes and motifs from his earliest years.

Kandinsky is one of the great influences on the art of our century. More than that he was a great authentic creator. If the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum helps to make the British public even slightly better acquainted with his work through these forty-five paintings, the exhibition will be more than justified. It is only hoped that in offering such a meagre handful of paintings by such a fecund artist their quality will suggest the fertility and variety of Kandinsky's genius.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is honoured in the opportunity to offer this selection of work by Kandinsky to London. We are particularly indebted to the Arts Council of Great Britain, its Director of Art, Mr Philip James, and the Assistant Art Director, Mr Gabriel White, without whose always sympathetic assistance the exhibition could not have been realized. It is also a great privilege for the Guggenheim Museum to show this group of Kandinsky's paintings from its collection in the Tate Gallery, to whose Trustees and Director, Sir John Rothenstein, we are most grateful.

James Johnson Sweeney

by W. Kandinsky

Reflections on abstract art

Abstract painters are in the dock, now they have to defend themselves. They must prove that non-figurative painting is true painting and has an equal right to exist with representational art.

This way of stating the problem seems inaccurate and not quite fair. I should be inclined to put it the other way and expect the champions of representational painting to prove that theirs is the only true art. Or in other words, they should *prove* that representation in painting is just as indispensable as colour and form (in its limited sense), without which painting could not be conceived.

Experiment in different epochs of painting produced artists who did not resort to representation but who emphasized the importance, above everything else, of the indispensable factors, form and colour.

Some of our recent abstract paintings are, in the best sense of the word, endowed with artistic life. They give out a vital vibration and radiance which has, through the medium of the eye, an impact on man's inner sensibility in a strictly pictorial way. All the same only some, among countless contemporary non-figurative paintings, are truly endowed with vitality. I would like to say straight away that the label Abstract is misleading and is dangerous if accepted literally. But for all I know the label Impressionism was coined and used in a derisory way against that

movement. The term Cubism, taken at its face value, is a vulgar slur on what is new in cubist art.

I have known for a very long time all the taunts that people throw at abstract painting.

It leads to an impasse: The Impressionists, the Cubists, the Expressionists, and the post-Impressionists have they not all had to listen to the same forbodings? All these 'trends' – and that is what such discoveries are normally called – have been dubbed by the Press, the public, and even artists themselves as 'anarchy' (Bolshevism had not yet reared its head) which threatens with destruction the 'eternal' principles of painting. The only comfort to be gained was that they would lead to a dead end. It was said that the Impressionists had debased art through their love of landscape and that this predilection indicated a disastrous decline in creative vitality. People spoke not only of an impasse, but of the death of painting, etc., etc. If one looks for examples of this kind of thing one can easily find them in the history of art.

The nature of art remains as always unchanged whether in painting or in music. Can anyone produce a critic who says that lieder and opera exclusively are the real essence of music and that pure symphonic music is intellectual, artificial, and can have no future? There was a time when people heard opinions such as these. Only the kind of art which is spiritually dead leads nowhere, while what is born of the spirit and nourishes it breaks down all the barriers and leads to freedom.

Intellectual activity. It is always unsafe to concentrate only on what is past and gone. It is dangerous to claim that novelty is a mistake because it has not happened before, since our

knowledge of the past is extremely defective. In the past in fact there can often be found instances closely related at least with present day new discoveries; think of Frobenius and his recent achievements.

Speaking of the intellectual approach, we are justified in saying that there were periods in art when the role taken by reason (or intellectual process) was not only important but decisive. We can also add that the intellect sometimes took a predominant part in creative art. We can equally well maintain, however, that up to the present the intellectual approach by itself, where there is no element of intuition, has never given birth to works of vital quality. But one can only be 'convinced', 'firmly believe', or declare that it never occurs because such a thing is outside the bounds of possibility.

I am giving you also my personal conviction, which I cannot prove. I can only quote my own experience: my few attempts to work exclusively in accordance with reason from the beginning to the end have never led to a final solution. For example I used to draw a picture in two-dimensional space calculated by the rules of mathematical proportion, but colour began to alter the proportions of the drawing to such an extent that it was no longer a solely mathematical problem.

This is understood by every artist for whom a painting must have vitality. Moreover, in colour itself (when abstracting it as far as possible from form) 'arithmetical' mathematics and 'pictorial' mathematics are totally different. When, for instance, to one apple one adds other apples, the number increases and they can be counted. But when one puts more

yellow in a picture the colour yellow does not increase, rather it becomes less. (What we had at the beginning and what we have at the end cannot be added.)

Woe to him who gives himself up simply to mathematics – to reason. The underlying laws that govern the painter's work and his energies, whether representational or abstract, are identical. The typical works of an abstract painter come from the common source of all the arts: intuition. Reason plays in every case the same part: it helps, whether in representational or non-representational works, but always as a factor of secondary importance.

Artists who call themselves 'pure constructivists' have made various attempts to build on a purely materialistic foundation. In order to serve modern 'rationality', in a suitable way, they have tried to eliminate 'feeling' (intuition) as outworn. They forget that there are two kinds of mathematics and that they were never able to propound a formula which met all the requirements of the picture. They were forced, therefore, either to paint spurious pictures or else correct reason by means of 'out-dated' intuition.

Henri Rousseau said once that his pictures were particularly successful whenever he heard in the clearest way within himself 'the voice of his dead wife'. I advise my pupils to learn to think in the same way and only to paint pictures when they hear the voice of 'their dead wife'.

Geometry. Why is it that a picture, in which geometrical shapes are recognizable, is called geometrical but a picture in which vegetable forms are present is not called botanical? Again, can't one call a picture musical if it is possible to distinguish on the canvas between a guitar and a violin?

Some abstract painters are blamed for giving themselves up to geometry. When I had to study anatomy at an art school (one for which I had no inclination as the teaching in the life class was so bad), my tutor Anton Azbe said to me 'You must understand anatomy, but in front of your easel forget it.'

After the landscape period of art had been 'accepted', the Press, the public, and artists themselves were the victims of a new scare. All at once people began more and more to paint 'still-life'. Landscape, they said then, has at least something alive about it (*nature vivante*), but it is not for nothing that this 'life' is called 'still' (*nature morte*). But artists needed subjects that were unobtrusive, peaceful, and almost insignificant. How calm an apple is when it is put beside the Laocöon.

A circle is even more restful, more so than an apple. Our epoch is hardly idealistic but among the important attainments and new-found discoveries of man one must appreciate this growing ability to hear sound within silence. For that reason noisy humanity gave place to the more silent art form, landscape painting, and landscape itself has been replaced by still-life which is even more silent.

We have taken a step forward. Nowadays a round spot in painting can be more significant than a human figure. A vertical line combined with a horizontal produce a sound that is almost dramatic. The impact of the acute angle of a triangle on a circle produces an effect no less powerful than the finger of God touching the finger of Adam in Michelangelo. And if fingers are not just anatomical or physiological but something more, so also a triangle or a circle is

something more than geometry. Therefore it transpires that silence sometimes speaks louder than sound and that which is dumb can achieve true eloquence.

Obviously abstract painting can, in addition to strictly geometrical shapes make use of endless 'free' forms, and side by side with primary colours, use an inexhaustible range of tones – always in harmony with the purpose of the pre-conceived idea.

Why this supposedly new faculty in man has now appeared is a complex problem which would lead us too far. It is enough for us to say that it is allied to the apparently new power which enables man to reach the essence and content of nature lying beneath its surface.

In course of time it will be proved clearly and infallibly that abstract art, far from being divorced from nature, is rather more closely and intimately linked with it than art ever was in the past.

The kind of people who can only see triangles in a picture and cannot therefore appreciate the painting, are the same as those who put a vine leaf on every male nude statue of antiquity. And I don't think that even the vine leaf was able to open their eyes to the plastic forms of antiquity.

Moreover, remember the saying of that great man of the theatre, Nelidoff, in his history of the Russian theatre – 'nothing is resisted with such savagery as a new form in art'.

A new form conceals its true meaning, at least with the majority of people, and it is time alone that can alter this.

(Originally published by C. Zervos in Cahiers d'Art, *no. 7–8, 1931)*

Plate 1 RAPALLO 1906 Oil on canvasboard (3)

Plate 2 STUDY FOR 'LANDSCAPE WITH A TOWER' 1908 Oil on board (4)

Catalogue

1 AMSTERDAM, NO.52 1903
Oil on board, $9\frac{3}{8} \times 13\frac{1}{8}$ in.

2 NO.59 1903?
Kallmunz, Oberpfalz Oil on canvasboard $9\frac{1}{2} \times 13$ in.

3 RAPALLO Early 1906
Oil on canvasboard $9\frac{1}{2} \times 13$ in. (*Plate* 1)

4 STUDY FOR 'LANDSCAPE WITH A TOWER' 1908
Oil on board $13 \times 17\frac{5}{8}$ in. (*Plate* 2)

5 CRINOLINES, NO.89 1909
Oil on canvas $37\frac{1}{2} \times 59\frac{1}{4}$ in. (*Plate* 3)

6 COMPOSITION, NO.2 1910
Oil on canvas $38\frac{3}{8} \times 51\frac{3}{4}$ in. (*Plate* 4)

7 LANDSCAPE 1910
Oil on canvas $26\frac{1}{8} \times 32$ in.

8 PASTORALE, NO.132 1911
Oil on canvas $41\frac{7}{8} \times 61\frac{3}{4}$ in.

9 WINTER STUDY WITH CHURCH 1911
Oil on board $13 \times 17\frac{5}{8}$ in.

10 NO.160b 1912
Oil on canvas $45 \times 62\frac{1}{2}$ in.

11 LIGHT PICTURE, NO.188 1913
Oil on canvas $30\frac{5}{8} \times 39\frac{3}{8}$ in.

12 LITTLE PLEASURES, NO.174 1913
Oil on canvas $43\frac{1}{2} \times 47\frac{1}{4}$ in.

13 PAINTING WITH WHITE FORM, NO.166 1913
Oil on canvas $47\frac{3}{8} \times 55\frac{1}{8}$ in.

14 PAINTING 1914
Oil on canvas $64\frac{1}{8} \times 48\frac{3}{8}$ in.

15 PAINTING 1914
Oil on canvas $64 \times 48\frac{1}{4}$ in. (*Plate* 5)

16 RED OVAL, NO.227 1920
Oil on canvas $28\frac{1}{2} \times 28$ in. (*Plate* 6)

17 BLUE SEGMENT, NO.235 1921
Oil on canvas $47\frac{3}{8} \times 55\frac{1}{8}$ in.

18 CIRCLE ON BLACK, NO.241 1921
Oil on canvas $54 \times 47\frac{1}{2}$ in.

19 BLUE CIRCLE, NO.242 1922
Oil on canvas 43×39 in.

20 EMPHASIZED CORNERS, NO.247 1923
Oil on burlap $51\frac{1}{4} \times 51\frac{1}{4}$ in.

21 IN THE BLACK SQUARE, NO.259 1923
Oil on canvas $38\frac{3}{8} \times 36\frac{3}{4}$ in.

22 YELLOW ACCOMPANIMENT, NO.269 1924
Oil on canvas $39\frac{1}{4} \times 38\frac{3}{8}$ in. (*Plate* 7)

23 POINTED AND ROUND, NO.293 1925
Oil on board $27\frac{5}{8} \times 19\frac{3}{4}$ in.

24 EXTENDED, NO.333 1926
Oil on wood $37\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{1}{2}$ in.

25 POINTED ACCENTS, NO.342 1926
Oil on canvas $31 \times 49\frac{1}{4}$ in.

Plate 3 CRINOLINES 1909 Oil on canvas (5)

Plate 4 COMPOSITION 1910 Oil on canvas (6)

26 THREE SOUNDS, NO.343 1926
Oil on canvas $23\frac{5}{8} \times 23\frac{5}{8}$ in.

27 TWO SIDES RED, NO.437 1928
Oil on canvas $22\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{1}{8}$ in.

28 LEVELS, NO.452 1929
Oil on board $22\frac{1}{4} \times 16$ in.

29 OBSTINATE, NO.474 1929
Oil on board $27\frac{3}{4} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$ in.

30 SOME RED, NO.441 1929
Oil on canvasboard $12 \times 15\frac{1}{4}$ in.

31 PRONOUNCED ROSE, NO.573 1932
Oil on canvas $31\frac{5}{8} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$ in.

32 BLUE WORLD, NO.602 1934
Oil with sand on canvas $43\frac{1}{2} \times 47\frac{3}{8}$ in.

33 DEVELOPMENT UPWARDS, NO.596 1934
Oil on canvas $31\frac{3}{4} \times 31\frac{1}{2}$ in.

34 VIOLET-ORANGE, NO.622 1935
Oil on canvas $35\frac{1}{8} \times 45\frac{7}{8}$ in.

35 ACCOMPANIED CONTRAST, NO.613 1935
Oil with sand on canvas $38\frac{1}{8} \times 63\frac{3}{4}$ in.

36 DOMINANT CURVE, NO.631 1936
Oil on canvas $50\frac{7}{8} \times 76\frac{3}{8}$ in. (*Plate* 10)

37 YELLOW PAINTING, NO.653 1938
Oil on canvas $45\frac{7}{8} \times 35$ in.

38 FRAGMENT, NO.718 1943
Oil on board $16\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Plate 5 PAINTING 1914 Oil on canvas (15)

39 TWILIGHT, NO.720 1943
Oil on board $22\frac{3}{4} \times 16\frac{1}{2}$ in. (*Plate* 9)

40 RIBBON WITH SQUARES, NO.731 1944
Oil on board $16\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Water-colours

41 WATER-COLOUR *c.*1910
Water-colour and ink $12\frac{1}{4} \times 18\frac{3}{4}$ in.

42 UNTITLED *c.*1914
$15\frac{3}{4} \times 14\frac{1}{4}$ in.

43 SKETCH FOR GRAY OVAL PAINTING, NO.217 1917
10 × 11 in.

44 NO.28 1922
13 × 19 in.

45 NO.58 1923
$18\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{1}{2}$ in.

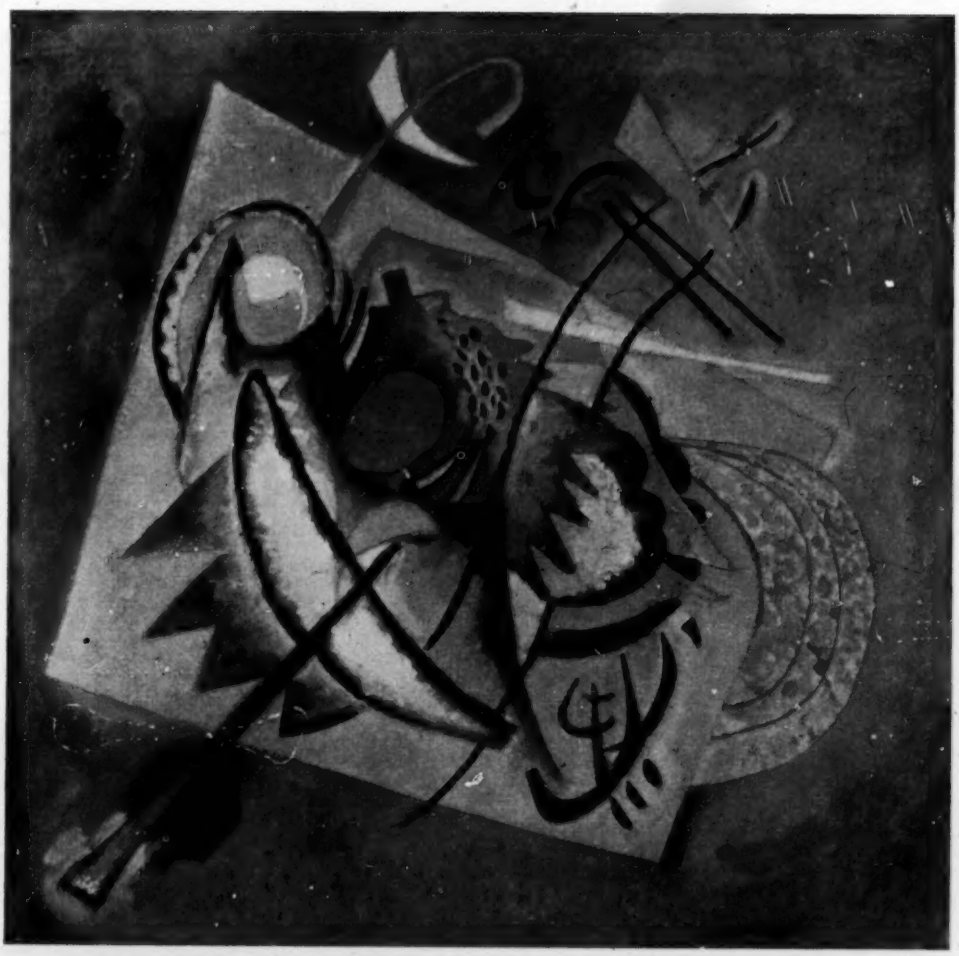

Plate 6 RED OVAL 1920 Oil on canvas (16)

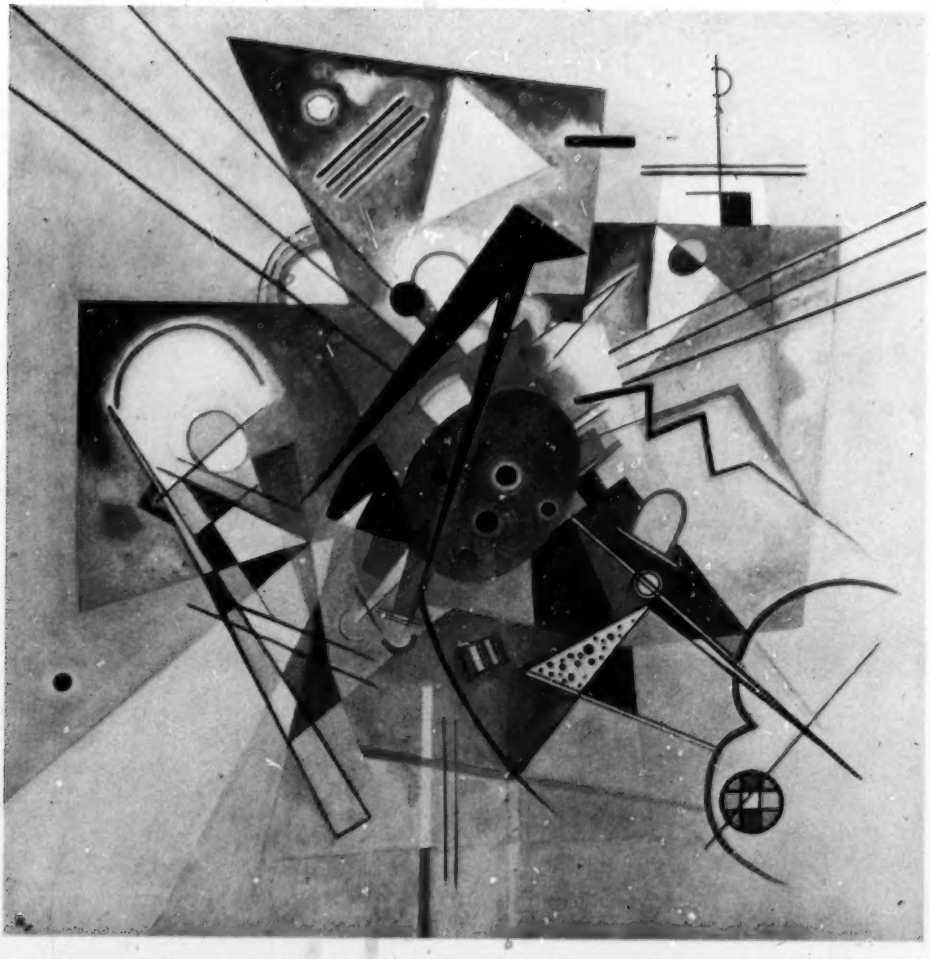

Plate 7 YELLOW ACCOMPANIMENT 1924 Oil on canvas (22)

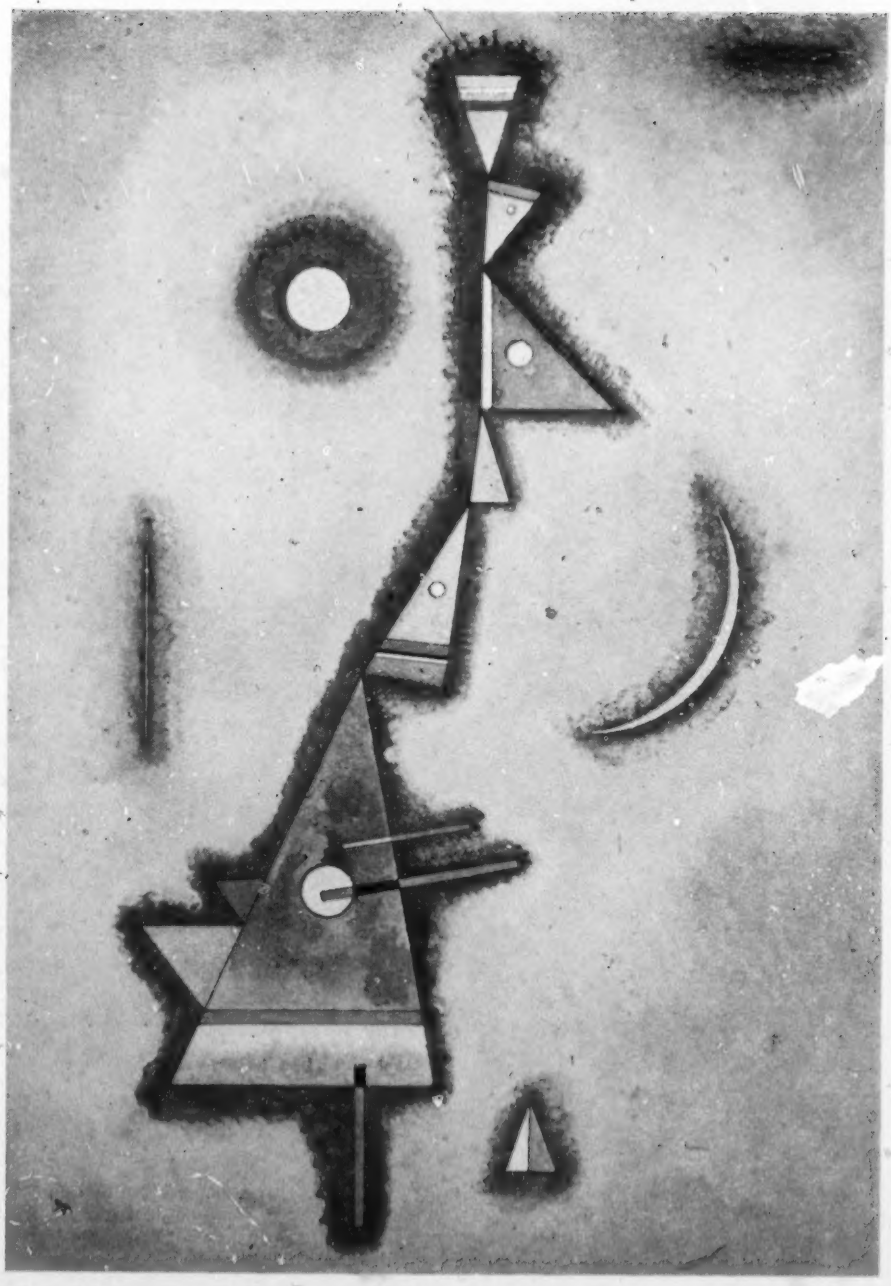

Plate 8 OBSTINATE 1929 Oil on board (29)

Plate 9 TWILIGHT 1943 Oil on board (39)

Plate 10 DOMINANT CURVE 1936 Oil on canvas (36)